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TELEGRAM

May 17, 2004

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 1589 - ROUTINE)
TAGS: PHUM, PREL, PINR
Captions: None
Subject: UAE ACTIVIST ATTEMPTS TO OPEN INDEPENDENT HUMAN RIGHTS
NGO
Ref: None

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 01589

SIPDIS
CXABU:
ACTION: POL
INFO: RSO AMB DCM P/M ECON

DISSEMINATION: POL
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: CDA:RALBRIGHT
DRAFTED: POL:SRADDANT
CLEARED: POL:JMAYBURY CG:JDAVIS

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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4381
INFO RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 4014
RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 001589

SIPDIS

STATE FOR DRL, G/TIP AND NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/14
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [TC](#)
SUBJECT: UAE ACTIVIST ATTEMPTS TO OPEN INDEPENDENT
HUMAN RIGHTS NGO

REFS: A) DUBAI 1372 B) ABU DHABI 2107 C) ABU DHABI
5821

Classified by Richard A. Albright, Charge D'Affaires,
a.i., for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Dr. Mohammed Abdullah Al-Roken (PLEASE
PROTECT), a Dubai-based Emirati human rights activist,
moderate Islamist, and longtime Embassy contact,
informed Poloff on May 9, under conditions of
confidentiality, that he and four women will attempt

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to open a "genuine, independent" human rights
organization in the UAE within the next few weeks.

However, he doubts that the UAEG will approve their plan, since the Government has historically maintained measures to keep NGOs under its control. END SUMMARY.

NEW HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION

12. (C) During a May 9 meeting to discuss the latest Human Rights Report, human rights activist, attorney, and former Chairman of the Jurists' Association (JA), Dr. Mohammed Abdullah Al-Roken, told Poloff that he and "four courageous women" will soon attempt to register a "genuine, independent human rights organization" in the UAE. Currently, there are no truly independent human rights organizations in the UAE. The JA has historically advocated for human rights, but it is a quasi-governmental organization. Al-Roken emphasized that the new NGO would work to advance human rights for UAE nationals and expatriates alike. He was adamant that the organization would not allow itself to be influenced or silenced by the government, unlike other Emirati NGOs that toe the government line to keep their subsidies flowing. Al-Roken said that he recently declined to be re-nominated to head the JA for another term to devote his time to forming this new organization, although he remains a member of the JA.

...BUT WILL IT FLY?

13. (C) Al-Roken said the group would be ready to approach the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs for permission required to register and legally operate an NGO within the next few weeks. He acknowledged, however, that the group's chances of receiving government approval are slim. (Comment: While the UAEG is very supportive of some organizations, such as the Red Crescent, the General Women's Union, and some cultural and environmental protection organizations, those groups steer clear of any speech or actions that criticize or could in any way embarrass the government. Few, if any, NGOs in the UAE operate outside of this kind of governmental influence. NGOs receive government funding, and do not speak against the government partly out of fear of losing their financial support. End Comment.)

14. (C) Al-Roken explained that current laws governing NGOs, which date back to the 1970s, allow the government to strictly control the speech, movements, and activities of NGO members. For example, members acting in an official capacity may not attend conferences, deliver speeches, or publish articles without prior government permission. In practice, these laws are largely ignored by many NGOs, but the government will enforce them on occasion to control the speech and movements of individuals and organizations considered "controversial." Al-Roken, considered one of the top three influential Islamists in the UAE (see refs A, B and C), falls into that category. As head of JA, he lobbied the UAEG to update its NGO laws for years. He was also one of six Islamist UAE University professors placed on "permanent sabbatical" in 2002 and banned from lecturing, publishing articles in UAE newspapers, and granting interviews to UAE journalists without prior government permission (PLEASE PROTECT). Al-Roken said that he was never given a reason for his dismissal, however, he (like many other knowledgeable observers) assumes that it was because of his political and religious views.

BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

15. (C) Al-Roken, who is in his thirties, has been an Embassy contact for several years. A political moderate, he was once an outspoken Islamist, although he has toned down his speech somewhat over the past few years at the request of the Government (see refs. A, B and C). He disavows fundamentalist goals and "jihadi" behavior, and has published scathing articles against political extremism ("Extremists Play into the West's Hands," "The Farce of Afghan Veterans' Posturing"). He has written books and articles on: domestic economic, social and legal issues ("A Call for Reform of the UAE Nationality Law," "Sept. 11 Affected GCC Economies, Too," "Facing Political, Social Ills Afflicting Gulf Societies as Change Takes Root"); human rights ("Human Rights under the Constitution of the UAE,"); and pro-democratization ("Bahrain Shows the Way for Region with Peaceful Participation"). He has written and spoken at conferences about the UAE/Iran dispute over the three islands in the Arabian Gulf, and called for the closure of the U.S. Army-run "School of the Americas" training facility (renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), denouncing it as an organization that encourages violation of human rights. Lately, Al-Roken has written a number of articles critical of the U.S.'s political and military actions in Iraq. After being banned from publishing articles in the UAE press in 2002, he began publishing his work in Lebanon and Qatar.

16. (C) Al-Roken received an LL.B. from Al Ain University, and an LL.M. and Ph.D. in Constitutional Law in 1992 from the University of Warwick in England. He practices general commercial and public law at Busit, Al-Roken and Associates in Dubai and Sharjah. He still carries the titles of Assistant Professor of Public Law and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Sharia and Law at UAE University in Al Ain, although he is no longer allowed to teach. From 1998 to 1999, Al-Roken was a legal advisor to the Federal National Council. A July 2001 Gulf News article lists Al-Roken as the vice president of the "National Committee Against Normalization with Israel," an unofficial organization with a mandate to resist UAE political normalization with the Israeli government.

COMMENT

17. (C) Al-Roken's efforts to work within the UAE legal structure to challenge the UAEG to change the way it handles NGOs is a rare phenomenon in the UAE. While the UAEG's human rights record is one of the best in the region, it is unlikely that the government will agree to allow this kind of scrutiny, especially when at least one of the group's founders has a history like Al-Roken's.

ALBRIGHT